



Michigan League FOR Human Services

Testimony Before the House Families, Children and Seniors Committee

Gilda Jacobs - June 14, 2011

Good morning Chairman Kurtz and members of the Committee. I am Gilda Jacobs, President & CEO of the Michigan League for Human Services. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

As we are all aware, there has been a lot of news coverage lately about the fraudulent use of cash assistance benefits, especially with the Michigan Bridge Card. These cases cannot help but pique the interest of the Legislature and the public about how government assistance is being used and, while we applaud the Legislature in working to ensure that government funds are used responsibly, we would like to caution you to not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

More than 226,000 people in Michigan receive Family Independence Program Benefits, 156,000 of whom are children, and 1.9 million Michiganders receive food assistance. This is a time of high need for government supports to help people sustain through these difficult times. Even as Michigan's unemployment rate is going down, the need for food assistance continues to rise. Government benefits are essential to keeping families fed, clothed and housed until more jobs are available, and everything should be done to preserve access to these important safety net programs.

In the pursuit of tightening oversight on the use of the Bridge Card, it is important to make sure that the burdens do not become so extreme that families that use government benefits honestly are punished for the acts of the few. We request that the Legislature look closely at these bills and determine what effect there may be for the sincere Michigan families that use these benefits to survive.

We are supportive of many of the measures being considered today, however, we do suggest that you consider the following as you debate these bills:

1. The cost of the implementation of some of the restrictions—will it result in less money being available for benefits? This may especially be true in requiring a photographic image on each Bridge card.
2. Barriers that may be put into place—such as limiting access to ATMs in smaller communities where there is only a limited supply or making it cost prohibitive for recipients to replace a lost or stolen Bridge card.

We applaud you on being good stewards of government money, and think it is very important that not all government assistance recipients are painted as fraudulent abusers of the system. According to the Department of Human Services, there are, on average, 5,000 prosecutions each year for fraud in either the application or use of all DHS assistance programs. That's less than .002 percent of the 2.9 million people who received government benefits in 2010. That is less than one in 500 recipients.

As representatives of the people, we hope you will see beyond the drama of the recent news stories. Instead, we encourage you to visit your local DHS office to see the real face of government assistance in Michigan, to meet the people who are struggling each day and are using these lifeline programs legally and appropriately, and remember that your job is also to safeguard them.

Thank you for your time.